

# ST WINEFRIDE'S WELL AND LEGEND

## I. THE WELL

*St Winefride, most admirable Virgin, even in this unbelieving generation still miraculous, pray for us!* In the small Flintshire town of Holywell, overlooking the "sands o' Dee" these words are made to haunt one. Our habitual mental focus is not readily re-adjusted, but a visit to the Well and Shrine of the seventh-century Cambro-British saint urges one to make the effort. The conditions of our times are such that they compel most of us willy-nilly to bow down in the House of Rimmon, and matters that to our forbears seemed reasonable and credible enough assume for us a quite contrary appearance. Probably—and some of us at least believe the assumption justified,—however much man's mental focus alters from age to age, the object of full and perfect vision is static and varies not. The pupils of humanity's eyes may see for the moment but a part of that object as through a glass darkly; may dilate with wonder, adoration, and even, maybe, with credulity; or they may contract in criticism and denial, without affecting the totality of what lies waiting to be perceived. From a proverbial age of miracles we glide into one repudiating the possibility of miracle, and it comes about that to days that seem to us a monument of credulity ours would have seemed a corresponding miracle of unbelief. But since to talk thus is but to argue in a circle and to beg the whole slippery question as to what miracle involves, it seems safer to assert that each age is characterised by its own peculiar wonders, sees its own special visions, and is

thereby self-blinded to those of other times; and he is wise who can adjust his own sight to shifting conditions, and who can reconcile and synthesise in just perspective the varying perceptions of different periods.

Holywell is situate two miles from its railway station, at the English end of the North Wales *Riviera*, and is reached by a road leading uphill through a broad ravine known locally as Sechnant, the "dry valley"; for before the waters from the wonderful well began to stream down it fourteen centuries ago, it was, as the name "sech" implies, waterless and dry. At the head of the valley stands a sixteenth-century chapel or oratory, in the crypt of which is the famous Well; and immediately adjoining is Trefynnon, "the settlement by the Well," or *anglice* Holywell, whence one may look down upon the broad estuary of the Dee just about to join the sea. The place has few attractions; the valley renders the air close and relaxing; material prosperity seems to have deserted it; some factories and one of the chief hotels are closed and derelict, whilst detached blocks and entire streets of small and often squalid cottages are conspicuous and bespeak by sundry tokens the presence of many Irish, much poverty, and that unprogressiveness in social and temporal matters which, to whatsoever cause attributable, is so often found associated with a poor and largely Roman Catholic populace. Amid these slums, however, are an admirably kept and appointed Catholic church and excellent schools, at the entrance to which stands a large, impressive figure of the Saviour, beneath whose hands of welcome and blessing every child that enters must pass. It is well and to the honour of the Church whose foresight prescribes these things, that those whose lives are perforce spent in mean houses and cheerless conditions should be reminded, by the presence among them of such striking symbols, of unseen providences and of the promise of fair habitations and tabernacles not made with hands.

The Well is by the roadside and may be entered by a turnstile for twopence. Twopence more secures a towel and bathing-dress if you propose to bathe. You

reach first an uncovered oblong pool shaped like a modern swimming-bath, stone built, surrounded by dressing-boxes, and some three feet deep. The water is entered by some steps, near the foot of which and immersed in the clear water is an aged, irregular slab of rock, known as St Beuno's Stone, upon which, as a centre of devotion, pilgrims are directed to kneel, and of which I shall say more presently. From this pool, an outer court of the Gentiles as it were, one passes into the inner sanctuary, which is the crypt of a chapel or oratory, once of great richness and beauty but now weather-worn and somewhat dilapidated, built upon the site of earlier premises shortly before the Reformation by Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, in association with various noble families, in the style of the well-known chapel bearing that King's name at Westminster Abbey. In the centre of this crypt and surrounded by an ambulatory, is a large hexagonal stone basin, some eight or ten feet deep, from the rocky floor of which wells — and has welled, it is said, for fourteen centuries — the miraculous spring of water, crystal-clear, with a faint green tinge. Slowly, steadily, and with scarcely an indication of being in motion, the water surges up; *labitur et labitur in omne volubilis ævum*, at an even rate of 3000 gallons per minute and at a mean temperature throughout the year of 54° F. From this hexagonal basin the water overflows through an iron grille into a *piscina*, intended apparently as the chief, as doubtless it was the original, bathing-place—a narrow grave-shaped hollow in the ground and overlooked by a large crucifix. The size of this bath allows of but one bather entering at a time, who descends into it by stone steps and, after wading through, leaves it at the other end by like means. An altar-shrine and statue of St Winefride stand close to this bath for the devotional purposes of pilgrims, and daily service is held here at noon. The water then flows from the grave-shaped *piscina* into the large oblong bath already mentioned, after which it passes away from consecrated premises to discharge secular offices. It first provides an adjoining brewery with

machine-power, and presumably with the fluidic constituent of beer; renders a similar service to a flannel factory a little farther on; and, after forming the water-supply of the inhabitants of the valley, loses itself, two miles away from its source, in the broad Dee. The pillars and walls of the crypt covering the Well are festooned with candles, banners, and votive offerings of crutches, splints, trusses, wreaths, written and even carved memorials, contributed by grateful pilgrims who have benefited there. Many submerged stones of the Well show extensive stains or patches of rich red colour. The mythopœic tendencies of the ignorant in past ages have attributed these to the blood of St Winefride, which, according to legend, was shed here and originated the Well; but modern critical scrutiny perceives them to be due to minute blood-coloured mosses. It is fair to the ecclesiastical authorities in charge of the place to say that the latter explanation is the one accepted by them, as also that they recognise that the water of the Well yields to chemical analysis no properties whatever of a medicinal or specially curative nature. The spring is of ordinary water that has percolated down from the limestone uplands above Holywell and finds a vent in this valley, which forms its conduit to the Dee, the natural drainage system of the district. The large bath, I perceived, is not guiltless of the presence of sticklebacks; they are, however, innumerable, and for a pilgrim to catch sight of them is, I was told *pour rive*, a not unpropitious omen.

The fame of the Well to-day is, except perhaps among the Catholic community, at its nadir, largely doubtless in sympathy with the general indifference of the age towards almost any but commercial and secular interests; in part also owing to the greater celebrity of the modern Lourdes; and, in some measure perhaps, by reason of the contemptuous attitude towards it of the Protestant community in the district, certain of whom described it to me as "the Catholic fraud." It is patronised, however, especially in summer, by a steady attendance, if not by a large number, of visitors,

the majority of whom seem to be of the poor Irish Catholic class from our great cities and industrial centres. I propose to say little here of cures effected at the Well. Records of numbers of such cases in both olden and modern times are to be found in the literature of the subject.<sup>1</sup> In support of such claims in earlier times, the Well must have had considerable reputation as a healing centre in the sixteenth century to justify the erection by people of distinction of the present buildings; whilst since that time numerous cures have been less or more well-authenticated, and the cumulative testimony creates a strong presumption in favour of so-called "miracles" having occurred.

Official bathing hours are appointed for each sex. Many pilgrims do not enter the water, but merely hold an arm or leg in it, bathe their faces or eyes, or drink of it; whilst many purchase specially provided cans to take water away for use in private or to despatch to friends at a distance. It must be remembered that all who come are not physically afflicted; the visit may be made as an act of faith or devotion, or to secure interior grace. To quote from the *Pilgrims' Manual*:

"Though most of the cures have been granted whilst bathing, it is by no means a necessary condition for obtaining signal favours and graces. Strong faith and persevering prayer are the first conditions. Many wonderful cures have been granted to those who have had a small quantity of the water sent to them at a distance. Others have been cured by external application of the water or of the relic of St Winefride. No fixed rule can be given as to the number of baths. Many striking cures have been effected at a first bath; in other cases the cure has not come till after three or nine or twenty or more baths have been taken. Further, three separate visits at intervals of a year or less are

<sup>1</sup> Attention is called to the following, procurable at the Well or from the Father Superior of the Catholic Mission at Holywell:—*Life of St Winefride*, by Fr. T. Swift, S.J., 1s.; *The Story of St Winefride*, and the *Pilgrims' Manual*, 1d. each; also to an excellent article in *Borderland* for November 1895, since reprinted in *Essays in Psychical Research* by Miss X. (Redway).

recommended by the tradition of the promise made by St Beuno to St Winefride that 'whosoever shall three times implore thy aid in sickness or misfortune shall at least at the third time obtain his request, if it be not opposed to the Divine Will.' It is quite sufficient to pass three times through the little Well and to kneel for a few seconds on St Beuno's Stone."

Undeniable and outstanding features of the scene at the Well are the poverty of most and the intense sincerity of all those who come in quest of healing. There are cripples and blind, deformed and maimed, suffering adults of both sexes, and diseased infants but a few weeks old that one wishes had never been born. Many are here, or are bringing their invalid friends or children here, for whom no hope from medicine or surgery remains, and who now, often after long periods of both physical and devotional preparation, have come in their trouble as to a last resource, and in the hope that some signal favour may be vouchsafed towards their dire need. One sees pain of body and anxiety of mind concentrated here in an intensity sometimes almost maddening, were it not irradiated by the splendid courage and the sacred simplicity of faith that is manifest amid the cruel distress and the pitiable infirmity.

I stand by the entrance-wicket, where literature, views, small images of saints, medals, and sundry accessories are purchasable, to watch and listen. A woman comes for a quart tin of water to take away; another for a bit of weed or moss from the submerged stones of the Well and supposed to possess healing properties—is not the weed "St Winefride's hair"? The station omnibus draws up and discharges a medley freight of infirm devotees and their friends; one sees crutches and bandages, and discerns surgical appliances ill-concealed beneath the best-clothes. "A statue of St Anthony, please; and what time will do for Mrs McNolan to be brought down to be taken into the water?" A decent, sad-looking working-man comes up bearing a girl with head and arms hanging invertebrately as a rag doll's over his shoulder. He has brought her from Lancashire and has no women folk

to look after her; he could manage to pay for her stay here for a few weeks if someone would kindly take her in, but he must get back to his work to earn the needful money. It is a case for the nuns at the local hospice, and the poor, undersized child with wan face and frightened, dark-glinting eyes—she looks five years old, I find she is eighteen—is taken to receive the care of the kind Sisters. (I saw her after her first bath; she had been carried through the water, after which she had already managed to stand up and was "doing very nicely.") Amid this crowd of poor and infirm, luxury hoots up in its motor touring-car, pays its twopences to enter, spends ten minutes in looking round, asks a few questions, shrugs its shoulders at the replies, and hoots away again. (*St Winefride . . . in this unbelieving generation . . . pray for us!*) Here is an aged, wizened dame with a crutch and obvious cataract, breathing wheezily as she hoists her old bones very slowly up the steps on her exit from the premises. She is assisted by a niece, a third of her age, whom she is scolding for cowardice in refusing to bathe and so preventing herself from doing. ("She's ninety-four, and been to New Zealand six times," says the niece aside to me; "comes here every summer she can, and says she'll go in the water to-morrow by herself if I won't go with her; she's that pluck!") A message comes for the attendant to carry through the bath some child or a poor wretch impotent to walk. A nurse in uniform enters with a little well-dressed boy who runs about the place quite happily and apparently in the best health; but round one of his bare knees is, alas! a stained bandage; it is a case of lupus. And here are three bright, hatless girls arm-in-arm, evidently holiday visitors from the seaside, chatting and laughing with a pleasantry almost unbecoming here; but no, the middle sister, I find, is totally blind. "The optic nerve has gone," they tell me, "and we understand what that means; so if anything happens here, we shall know there has been a miracle."

Inside the large bath there is considerable commotion. There is the splash of water, and now and again the



scream of a child or girl upon being taken into the cold pool. One lady is in great request, and is constantly in and out of the water and dressing or undressing. Presently I hear from her own lips that upon two separate occasions some years ago she herself received here instantaneous relief that effected the elongation of a deformed leg in one case, and, in the other, obviated amputation of the arm after an accident. As an act of thanksgiving she comes now each summer to encourage and give confidence to other sufferers, and, leading them into the water, she recites for them the litany of St Winefride and calls upon the bystanders to make the prescribed responses.

Upon another occasion a refined, handsome lady comes to take one of a series of baths. There happen for the moment to be no other bathers present, and she enters the water alone. I retire for the time being from the bath, but the door, chancing to be opened by an attendant, I catch a brief and involuntary glimpse of her standing in the pool with closed eyes and lips moving in intensity of supplication, whilst with one hand she dashes water upon her hip. Later on, in response to a complimentary remark made in my hearing upon her robust appearance, her ready and frank answer was: "Oh, there's nothing the matter with *me*. I come in the interests of others who cannot come themselves or have not the means to do so. I have a boy at home with hip-disease, for whose sake I bathe my own hip, and there are many others whose infirmities I come here each season to remember. It is not for me to say how or why cures result from my agency to people at a distance, but the fact remains that several of those in whose behalf I have come have benefited remarkably."

Undoubted cures take place, and Protestants and sceptics no less than Catholics have benefited from the Well. Of course there are many disappointments. Some cures are instantaneous, others occur gradually and after the patients have left the district for their homes. A few days before my recent visit a child of six, carried in in a splint made to extend to every part

of the body, had left the Well whole after a single bath—the complicated surgical contrivance of steel and leather being left behind at St Winefride's altar, where it now hangs as a memorial; a blind man had regained his sight; whilst a young woman who had arrived yesterday on crutches had been able to leave them behind after years of use, and I saw her gleefully but clumsily running about in her bathing dress after taking a further bath in the hope of completely curing her thin, distorted legs. To all enquiries made from those in official attendance at the Well the sole answer elicited—and it is quite frank and sincere—is an allusion to the power of faith and the mysterious working of the Divine Will.

Apart from all religious or scientific questions involved, one cannot witness such scenes as these without considerable emotion. In a great hospital one finds an even larger concentration of human wreckage, and witnesses the grim business of surgery and medicine working in skilled, organised fashion to effect relief. Humanity in health of body and vigour of intellect is pitting itself to win as against humanity in pain and misery; there are recognised methods of procedure, rules of the game to be observed upon both sides to the struggle; and whilst the emotional aspect of the picture is not absent, the conditions which prevail prevent it from assuming emphasis, and it is neutralised by the predominating atmosphere of "business." But here things are different. The sense of tragedy is present; the pathos of it all is more poignant, and there are no conventions to restrain it. To those coming here scientific skill has as a rule said its last word, and that—one without hope. The demands made here are not those of the logical mind to the latest word of medical skill and to accredited methods of relief; they are cries to an ultimate unseen court of appeal, to potencies unknown and indeterminate; they are heart-cries to something beyond the region of sense and logic; and, far from appearing unworthy or unreasonable, there is in them something of the quality of heroism from the fact that they are raised, and raised in con-

fidence, in an age when the general tendency is towards stifling emotionalism and ridiculing all aspirations beyond the power of academic science to gratify. The purposes of a shrine of this nature are, I repeat, not restricted to physical healing alone, but, since it is of physical relief that I speak for the moment, it must be recognised that in regard thereto two facts are patent: one, that the water of the Well admittedly possesses no medicinal properties; the other, that cures, whether instantaneous, gradual, or of patients at a distance through the vicarious agency of their friends, are in fact effected. Wherein lies the explanation? Miracle, faith, auto-suggestion, shock, psychic influences, or what not? But this question we will defer, in order to approach it again after taking into consideration such light as may be gained from ascertaining, if it be so possible, the original purpose of the Well.

## II. THE LEGEND

So far from this Well being exceptional, sacred wells, wishing-wells, and curative bathing-places have existed throughout history. To water itself there has always been attributed profound symbolic significance, as the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures testify *passim*. "In water there is a quality endowed with a blessing," sings Taliesin, chief of the Welsh bards—contemporary, by the way, with St Winefride—in a fine mystical poem in the *Mabinogion* that, telling in a parable the story of the human soul, its descent into the body of flesh and its redemption therefrom, relates how—

Into a dark leathern bag I was thrown  
And on a boundless sea I was sent adrift;  
Which was to me an omen of being tenderly nursed,  
And the Lord God then set me at liberty.

But apart from any purposed religious attributions, running water has ever a subtle charm for us all. Our favourite recreation-ground, like that of Shakespeare's Welshman, is

By shallow rivers, by whose falls  
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

Some deep, unanalysed instinct leads us to the waterside—or is it the water itself that has some secret magnetic influence drawing us to it? However it be, the attraction is universal. The motive that draws the Hindu multitudes to bathe in the sacred Ganges manifests in our own Sankey-hymn choralists who look forward to the day when

We shall gather by the river, etc. etc.

Oases in tropical deserts have a symbolic significance as well as a utilitarian purpose for their denizens. In pre-Christian Greece, Italy, Syria, and Asia Minor, springs of water, often associated with guardian genii or with the healing cultus of Æsculapius, were once abundant; Jacob's well, the rivers Abana and Pharpar, and the pool of Bethesda are among biblical examples of them. And there is nothing surprising in the fact that the religio-romantic Celt should have reproduced so frequent a phenomenon. To trace the true history of specific places is now impossible; origins are lost in the distant haze of folklore and primitive religion. The modern example of Lourdes seems to rest upon a footing of its own and, if we accept the authorised account of its genesis, to come within the category of discoveries which the author of the *Religio Medici* quaintly declares to be due to "the courteous revelations of spirits."

The official account of the origin of St Winefride's Well is derived from two more or less mutually corroborative sources. The chief and longer was compiled in 1137 by Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, who says he "collected it partly from detached writings preserved in churches of the district, and partly from the narratives of priests whose veracity is recommended by their venerable age and by the habit they wear." A shorter, perhaps rather earlier, version is by an unknown monk of Basingwerke, near Holywell. The Well had been in use for 500 years before these authors' time—St Winefride's life being attributed to the years 610–660,—so that, although the Well must have acquired great repute in the interval, the narratives

are very considerably *a posteriori*, and this at a date when literary records necessitate very critical scrutiny, however good the faith in which they were composed. The essential features of the legend are these:

Early in the seventh century a holy man, St Beuno—well known in the annals of Welsh sanctity—wandered into Flintshire under divine guidance and was moved to apply to one Teuyth, the proprietor of three manors and father of but one child, a daughter named Brewi or Frewi, to ask for a grant of land upon which to build a chapel and say Mass to the advantage of the district. The request was granted, and there was allotted to him the modern Holywell valley then known as Sechnant, owing to its being waterless (Sech, i.e. *siccus*—*sèche*, dry). He built a chapel, said his daily office, and undertook the education of the maid Brewi. One day her parents had gone to church, the girl remaining alone at home—in one version owing to sickness; in the other, to prepare and bring to the church fire, water, salt, and other things required for Mass. At this point Caradoc, the wild, lawless son of a local chief, called at the house during a hunting expedition, asked for refreshment and to see the girl's father, but, finding her alone, made unwarranted overtures to her. Brewi, already dedicated to virginity and to the Divine service, made a pretext to leave the room, and thereupon rushed from the house, to gain protection in the chapel, where service was now proceeding. Caradoc followed and overtook her not far from the chapel, and, upon her further resistance, struck off her head with his sword, the head rolling down the ravine into the open door of the chapel. During the ensuing consternation, St Beuno came down from the altar, lifted up the head, and, recognising its owner, uttered a curse upon the murderer and a prayer for the resuscitation of the girl. The former "melted away before their eyes, like wax before the fire," being swallowed up by a chasm in the earth, whilst, as St Beuno replaced the head upon its body, the girl returned to life and animation, showing only a slender white scar around her neck. At the place where her severed head had fallen a great spring

of water burst forth and has continued to flow from that day to this, thus forming the present holy well, whilst the stones stained by her blood have ever since been red-stained. Brewi thereafter was known by the new name of Gwen-frewi (*anglice*, Winifred); the prefix *Gwen* meaning white, in allusion to the whiteness of both her scar and her sanctity. After this ordeal she continued to remain under the spiritual guardianship of St Beuno for some years, when he received a monition to go elsewhere. He, however, left her to carry on his and her own good work in the valley, and, departing, bestowed his blessing and three promises upon her: one, that the stones should never cease to show the red traces of her passion and be a memorial of her chastity; a second, that "whosoever shall at any time in whatever sorrow and suffering implore your aid for deliverance from sickness or misfortune, shall at the first, or the second, or certainly the third, petition obtain his wish"; and a third, that when he had himself departed to "the habitation God will provide for me on the margin of the sea," a gift sent by her to him once a year should reach his hands. Now there chanced to be a rock projecting from the stream caused by the miraculous spring, upon which the good man had been wont to pray; it is the rock previously referred to as St Beuno's Stone, and the legend concludes with the assertion that during the rest of her life Winefride each year made a cloak as a gift for St Beuno; that on the vigil of St John Baptist she placed it upon the stone; that it was washed down the little stream into the big river—the Dee—and the big river carried it to the sea, whose waves bore it safely to the Saint. He appears to have taken up his new abode at Cynnog, on the Carnarvonshire peninsula, where the remains of his monastery still exist, and where, unwetted by the water, the cloak is said to have been washed up at his feet the following morning with unfailing regularity.

Now, read literally, here is an utterly impossible story. (*St Winefride . . . in this unbelieving generation . . . pray for us!*) Some concession is at once afforded us by a statement in the officially issued *Life* that "no

Catholic is bound to accept in its entirety the account as thus handed down to us . . . the details of the history have to rest on their own evidence . . . they were included in the old Sarum office but are not embodied in our present breviary"; for which relief much thanks! But before offering an interpretation which, by ascertaining the true and inward spirit of the legend, may preserve its truth after another than a literal manner, a preliminary clearing of the ground may be effected by reference to a few noteworthy points. The legend appears to be a composite one containing elements deriving from Latin and Celtic religious sources respectively. To Latin sources is probably due so much of the story as refers to (1) the father of Winefride, who owned three estates, and dedicated one of these along with his daughter to the Divine service; the same legend obtains of the father of the Virgin Mary, as may be found in a sermon upon our Lady by Tauler, the great friar preacher of Strasburg of the fourteenth century; (2) the martyrdom: which is seldom found in connection with Celtic saints; (3) the incident of the spring of water originating where Winefride's severed head struck the ground. As to this, the Bollandist Father de Smedt, S.J., who has collated the records, deposes to having met with no less than twelve occurrences of this kind in the lives of Cambro-British saints, a fact which, whilst tending strongly to negative the historicity of such incidents, creates, nevertheless, by its very repetition and emphasis, an equally strong presumption in favour of the story of the death and resuscitation having been introduced with an ulterior purpose, and that of a figurative and mystical nature. Probably all these twelve occurrences are referable to a like tradition regarding St Paul, which alleges that at his execution outside the walls of Rome his head fell and bounded thrice upon the ground, whence three springs of water at once issued; the site, formerly known as *Aquæ Salvæ*—the Waters of Salvation—is now called *Tre Fontane* (*Tres Fontes*), a name suspiciously like *Trefynnon*, the Welsh name for Holywell. (4) The incident of the liquefaction and

disappearance of the murderer, also of Latin origin, corresponds with several similar occurrences to redoubtable sinners who had the misfortune to fall foul of this or that Welsh saint. It may be regarded as purely symbolical of the annihilation of evil by goodness.

But the final part of the legend, concerning Winefride's yearly gift to St Beuno, of its deposit upon the stone and its unwetted transportation to his dwelling-place, has not a Latin but a strong Celtic savour. Again, we must not read literally; so to do involves obvious incredibilities. Moreover, a similar incident occurs in the life of the Irish St Lenanus, whilst in Celtic hagiology frequent tales are to be found of tokens and of holy men drifting in rudderless boats over the waters to providentially appointed places. It remains, then, to see if it be possible to determine, with any degree of probability as to its truth, what idea, if any, underlies an episode of this character, and why it should have been made the appendage and anticlimax of the central dramatic incident of the reputed murder and reanimation of St Winefride, which in turn, as already suggested, may be merely a veil covering some interior intention.

Now where primary evidence is, as here, inaccessible, any hypothesis offered can be but an effort of the imagination, and its plausibility is supportable only by reference to well-recognised methods of symbolical imagery employed elsewhere for the dual purpose of veiling and expressing religious truths. The present legend is full of suggestiveness, as also of affinities with other legends, and it is difficult to account for the invention of so elaborate a story and for its long and tenacious perpetuation save upon the supposition that originally it possessed a basis of truth of some kind, and not necessarily of a historical or objective nature. To the nebulous ages before that of modern letters is attributable a vast quantity of folklore, myths, fairy-tales, and romances, some of which still survive, embodying, as, e.g., the Graal legends, often in extremely subtle and beautiful ways, profound religious and philosophical truths, though seldom recognised nowadays



as enshrining such. Owing to its affinity with analogous coeval legends and to its own internal evidence, there are, I think, warrants for supposing the Winefride story to be of this nature. In origin it may have been that the legend was compiled, whether with or without reference to any actual historic person or event, as one purposely fabricated in *quasi*-historical form, but without intent that it should be treated as history; that it was a parable intended for use in connection with some simple religious rite in times before the Roman supplanted the Celtic Church, and for the offices of the latter substituted its own. Those familiar with the *quasi*-historic legend of the mythical Hebrew Hiram Abiff and with the purpose to which it has been applied, will be best able to follow my suggestion that the legend of St Winefride may once have served a similar purpose; a purpose that became abrogated upon the introduction of the sacramental offices, especially that of baptism, of the Latin Church (which, however, undoubtedly took over the Well and permitted the continuance of the legend in an adapted and elaborate form) and that in process of time became lost sight of utterly. There is, I am told, in Pembrokeshire, another holy well of little modern repute, the water of which is traditionally served by a hereditary custodian in the skull of a saint. Now if this simple rite ever had any symbolic religious significance, which is probable, it implies that that water which "springs up unto everlasting life" is attainable only by the path of sanctity and self-mortification. And hence it is no far cry from this well to that of St Winefride, where it is still the duty of the pilgrim seeking health or grace to walk thrice through the waters filling a symbolic grave. As said above, the small and chief bath is a grave-shaped excavation, and, though of sixteenth-century construction, the sepulchral *piscina* doubtless is a faithful reproduction of one that for many centuries had anteceded it.

Whatever else may be said for it, the legend of St Winefride is surely a parable of the soul's life; one of the many parables and figures by which religious truth

was taught in early unlettered days. Under the familiar image of a chaste woman, the virginal soul is depicted as yielding itself to the claims of its own higher and better part, personified by the wandering Beuno, who "hath not where to lay his head" until someone grants him a place of rest where he can build a "church," Teuyth's three manors being a figure for the three estates of the human realm: body, soul, and spirit. There ensues a period of self-dedication and discipline in anticipation of the great regenerative change, and of this the imagery lies in Winefride's years of education by the saint and in her being actually engaged in preparing the elements for the Holy Sacrifice—the symbol of her own passion—at the very moment that the dark powers, in the guise of the lustful Caradoc, enter and make trial of her. It is noteworthy that the place of her preparation and trial is Sechnant, the dry valley, for the soul's quest occurs in the wilderness of this world and in conditions of inward aridity; and this again connects with the Psalmist's "valley of the shadow of death" and with Ezekiel's "valley of dry bones." Her decapitation and subsequent resuscitation, coupled with the extinction of the evil power, are but a portrayal of what in the annals of sanctity of all faiths are known as mystical death and its inevitable consequent, mystical rebirth. After this she is given the "new name" that in Christian doctrine distinguishes the regenerate from the unregenerated man. That around a voluble and notable spring of water a legend of this nature should have been compiled by old-time religious instructors with a keen eye for the sacramentalism of natural phenomena, such as the bards possessed, and with a view to the spiritual edification of a semi-barbarous people, is, I submit, entirely probable. It is impossible, in the absence of positive evidence, to put the claim higher than this or to disprove it, and the suggestion is here offered for what it may be worth.

We come now to that other part of the legend concerning St Beuno's stone and to his removal, when his transmutative work in the Dry Valley was done, to an unknown, divinely appointed place whereat the



sanctified Winefride, or that which she personifies, could communicate with him supernaturally. The stone immersed in the Well, upon which pilgrims still kneel in emulation of St Beuno who so used it, suggests a connection with many other sacred stones all having a common symbolic value and root. The Kaabeh adored at Mecca is for the Moslem pilgrim the symbol of the basal Reality which underlies all manifested things and "without which there is nothing made that is made." The reputed stone of Jacob in the Coronation-chair at Westminster is another emblem of that strength from and to which all other power must needs emanate and be referable; of that rock "upon which," it is recorded, "I will build my Church," and to which St Paul alludes in saying, "And that rock was Christ." Again, those acquainted with the symbolical terminology of the spiritual Alchemists will recall the philosophical "stone" which is to be found in the philosophical "water that wetteth not the hands," just as the cloak despatched by Winefride reached St Beuno undamped; and, though it were vain to suggest that the Hermetic tradition, as such, was known in Wales in the seventh century, the fact remains that an equivalent idea or doctrine has persisted through the ages and has been reproduced in various ways. In virtue of this symbolism, the traditional devotion upon St Beuno's immersed stone by pilgrims assumes the nature of an extremely appropriate and sacramental act of faith, and this in a degree far greater than is perhaps recognised by those who perform it, owing to the story's concealed significance having become lost.

There remains that romantic and extremely beautiful episode of St Winefride's cloak yearly deposited on the stone and transmitted thence by water to St Beuno at his distant and unknown home. Here, it may be, is concealed a reference to a very high doctrine; to that, namely, of the Communion of Saints; the interfusion of consciousness in a Holy Assembly of souls that have attained to an exalted, perfected state possible only to the sanctified. Again I refrain from being dogmatic, but I confess to a personal intuition that

tells me that in this incident there is both the promise and the echo of a fulfilment of that benediction of the Church which says, *Ad societatem civium supernorum perducatur nos Rex Angelorum!* Readers familiar with two great books upon this subject—Eckartshausen's *Cloud upon the Sanctuary* and Mr Waite's *Hidden Church of the Holy Graal*—will follow my meaning and know the Christian aspect of this high theme. But so universal is the symbolic imagery of cloaks and wedding-garments, of streaming water, and of the great sea, that I suppose an enlightened Buddhist or Vedantist would readily apprehend the sense of this marvellous piece of Celtic mysticism, and would discern in the cloak an allusion to a subtler vehicle of consciousness than the physical organism, a vehicle by which it is possible for the higher mentality of man to transcend the normal brain-states and, as "the dewdrop slips into the shining sea," to pass into that "conscious rest in omniscience" which in the Orient is called Nirvana and in the Christian fold the Divine Union. The contemptuous Welsh Nonconformist spoke to me of St Winefride's Well and its associations as "the Catholic fraud." I dare say that sometimes at the conventicle of his dismal sect he joins in singing—not, I hope, without interior relish—a gracious and well-worn hymn in which are the words—

Till in the ocean of Thy love  
We lose ourselves in heaven above.

If so, he little suspects his unconscious testification to what is involved in the story of Winefride's "cloak" journeying over the waves "to a habitation by the sea, appointed by God."

The suggestion here offered, then, is that St Winefride's Well was once a centre of Celtic Christianity where religious instruction was imparted through the medium of a primitive legend, and that both the Well and the legend in an elaborated form were assumed and taken over subsequently by the Roman Church. That the inner purport of the imparted doctrine, intended primarily to be of a mystical nature, should in

process of time have become lost, and the Well reduced from its first intention to a place of pilgrimage for, almost exclusively, the cure of bodily disease, is only to say that they have shared the general process of materialisation which every expression of spiritual truth sooner or later undergoes in the public mind. One need not, however, conclude that bodily cures were excluded from the original intention of the place, for physical health has often a direct connection with interior well-being. The power that can heal and uplift that part of our organisms which is higher than the physical has *a fortiori* at least equal jurisdiction over our grosser part, and the body is redeemable no less than the soul. Indeed, we are coming nowadays to discern the mutual interdependence of the two; to recognise that there is a sense in which the twain are one or may become at one; that even the material husk of ourselves and of all else is in its nature psychical; and that action and reaction are, for good or evil, continually passing between the multifarious constituents of that great pan-psychic Unity which we call the World. And herein—apart from all ultra-human potencies and possibilities, as to which it is not my business here to speak—lies a clue to the problem of the healings that are spoken of as “miraculous.” The psychic forces generated in a shrine like this by the intense yearnings, the faith, and the aspirations of the troops of our afflicted brethren who for fourteen centuries have been visiting it in quest of life and healing, are not, be assured, utterly lost or wasted energies. The atmosphere of the place is charged with them. They have penetrated its walls and have soaked into its ancient stones until the accumulated force of that “effectual fervent prayer” which “availeth much” has induced conditions that, reacting upon certain persons chancing to be *en rapport* with, and susceptible to, the influence of this particular magnetic field, suffice to produce palpable physical effects in correspondence with the aspirant’s desires.

Three visits to St Winefride’s Well are prescribed by the tradition as desirable for securing a remedy for

any ill. Thrice is the prepared pilgrim directed to pass through the healing stream, that thereby, as may be assumed from the symbolism of the act, he may be made whole in his triple parts of body, soul, and spirit. And I, a mere casual visitor and spectator there “in this unbelieving generation,” reflecting upon my unpremeditated actions during a recent holiday, recall that, moved by what I saw and heard and read of it, upon three successive occasions I was drawn to visit the Well, in the hope of rending the veil of outward appearances and plucking out the heart of its inward mystery. In what is here written to that end I may or may not have succeeded; but if to St Winefride or her legend I have done any violence, may she, “still miraculous,” pardon the offence for its good motive of directing attention to an ancient shrine and endeavouring to determine the value of a charming and an impressive story.